

Tradition as Transmission: A (Partial) Defense*

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1 Disclaimer

Linda Zagzebski's *Epistemic Authority* is a wonderful book, and I learned a great deal from reading it. But philosophers are trained to disagree, so disagree I shall. (I would be glad to learn that the distance between us is more apparent than real.)

2 Tradition as Transmission

In discussing religious authority in ch. 9 of her book, Zagzebski distinguishes three conceptions of how divine revelation is transmitted through a religious tradition. According to one of these conceptions, which henceforth I'll call *Tradition as Transmission*, a religious tradition consists solely in chains of testimony that stretch back to an original encounter with some past events.¹ Zagzebski raises two objections to this model, the first of which is that it fails to explain how such a tradition can be a source of knowledge:

On the chain model it is crucial that the chain is unbroken and that the transmission is accurate. This model assumes that *what* is transmitted remains the same as what it was at the point of origin. Revelation in this model is fragile because every time it passes from hand to hand, it runs the risk that some of it gets lost or distorted. On this model nobody can be as justified in a belief acquired through the mechanism of the tradition than the person who had divine contact at the beginning of the chain. The nearer one is to the source of revelation, the more complete and accurate the knowledge. Given that we are so far in time from the origin of the chain, the

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¹ As Zagzebski puts it, on this model "the transmission of a tradition is reducible to chains of testimony. What justifies belief in what the tradition transmits is a relation to something that happened at the origin—for example, the experience of Moses on Sinai, the Apostles' experience of Jesus Christ, or the revelation of Muhammad, and what happened at the origin is understood as immediate contact with the divine, the experience of which is transmitted by oral and written testimony to the present" (p. 193).

most we can do is to study old sources in greater depth, or perhaps discover ancient books that were lost at some point along the chain. (p. 193)

As she notes, Zagzebski's argument here parallels a passage in Locke's *Essay*, where he writes that "any Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less force and proof it has":

The Being and Existence of the thing it self, is what I call the original Truth. A credible Man vouching his Knowledge of it, is a good proof: But if another equally credible, do witness it from his Report, the Testimony is weaker; and a third that attests the Hear-say of an Hear-say, is yet less considerable. So that *in traditional Truths, each remove weakens the force of the proof*: And the more hands the Tradition has successively passed through, the less strength and evidence does it receive from them. (Bk. IV, ch. xvi, §10)²

For Zagzebski as for Locke, the fallibility of human testimony means that a person who believes a proposition on the say-so of another is necessarily in a worse epistemic position than the person whose testimony she believes. In Zagzebski's view, this shows that an adequate model of religious tradition must take it to involve more than mere chains of testimony, at least if it is to explain the possibility of genuine religious knowledge.

As I read him, Thomas Aquinas endorses the opposite position in his discussion of sacred doctrine (what we today call "theology") in the first chapter of the *Summa Theologiae*:

Sacred doctrine is a science. Yet bear in mind sciences differ from each other. Some work from first principles known by the natural light of the intellect – such as arithmetic, geometry, and the like. Others, however, work from principles known by the light of a higher science. Optics, for instance, begins from geometrical principles, and music proceeds from arithmetical ones.

Sacred doctrine is a science in the second sense here, for it proceeds from principles made known by a higher science – that of God and the blessed. So, just as music relies on principles taken from arithmetic, sacred doctrine relies on principles revealed by God. (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 2, c.)³

²For a similar position with respect to demonstrative reasoning, see Book I, Part IV, Section 1 of Hume's *Treatise* ("Of scepticism with regard to reason"). Hume's argument there suggests a "bad company" objection to Locke's and Zagzebski's: inference is fallible, so if my belief that *p* is based on inference, then by parity of reasoning I should know it less well than I know what it is based on. Some philosophers would accept this consequence, but I expect that Zagzebski will not. For related discussion, see T. Burge, "Content Preservation", *The Philosophical Review* 102: 457-488.

³In Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*, ed. B. Davies and B. Leftow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

In calling theology a science (*scientia*), Aquinas means to distinguish it from uncertain or merely probable bodies of knowledge or opinion, categorizing it instead as the sort of demonstrative understanding described by Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics*.⁴ This generates a puzzle, however, since according to Aristotle such understanding must proceed from self-evident first-principles, and even sensory perception is ruled out as a source of understanding in this strict sense. Aquinas' response to the puzzle is contained in the passage quoted above: he holds that one body of scientific knowledge will sometimes "borrow" some of its first principles from another *scientia*, as the principles of music are not proved within music itself, but rather within mathematics. Applied to the present case, Aquinas' claim is that the *scientia* of divine things that we have through sacred theology is based on God's immediate knowledge of himself, which is shared with human beings through God's special revelation and the teaching of the church. Yet he insists that this does not render theology any more "fragile" than other bodies of knowledge, but rather that it is made *more* certain through this mediation than it would be if it had been based on human reason alone:

We reckon one theoretical science to be more noble than another first because of the certitude it brings ... The science of sacred doctrine surpasses the others [on this count], because theirs comes from the natural light of human reason, which can make mistakes, whereas sacred doctrine is held in the light of God's knowledge which cannot be mistaken. (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 5, c.; and cf. II-II, q. 2, a. 4, c.)

While Aquinas accepts that the knowledge of God that we attain in this way is less perfect than knowledge gained through epistemically unmediated contact with the divine (see e.g. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 11), the explanation of this has to do with the inability of humans in our present state to understand divine things except by comparing them to created ones, and not with any lack of certainty arising from the mediation of chains of testimony. Unlike Zagzebski, Aquinas sees no problem in the idea that such chains are able to transmit religious knowledge.

I believe that Aquinas' view of this matter is correct, and that the model of religious tradition in terms of testimonial transmission is perfectly able to explain how later generations in a religious tradition can have knowledge at least as secure as that of their ancestors. Section 3 will argue for this, inspired by some arguments in Tony Coady's seminal work *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*.⁵ In the concluding section, I will consider Zagzebski's other objection to Tradition as Transmission, arguing that it is more successful than this first one.

⁴See G. Turner, "St Thomas Aquinas on the 'Scientific' Nature of Theology", *New Blackfriars* 78: 464-476.

⁵C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), ch. 11. It's worth noting that Coady's brief discussion of Aquinas in pp. 16-17 of *Testimony* gets his view flatly wrong, and reads Aquinas as holding that faith cannot be a source of knowledge. (Part of the fault lies with the translation that Coady is working from.) A more detailed discussion of how Aquinas' views relate to contemporary work on testimony will have to wait for another essay.

3 Beyond Telephone

As I see it, Zagzebski's initial argument against the model of Tradition as Transmission requires construing all chains of testimony as similar in structure to a familiar children's game:⁶

Telephone People are arranged in a line. Someone whispers a message to the first person in line, who whispers it to the second, and so on down. Each person's whisper is inaudible to everyone but the person she is whispering to. When the message reaches the end of the line, it's reported to the whole group.

In *Telephone*, the silliness of the context and the twin difficulties of whispering clearly and making out what is being whispered to you interact to make it unlikely that the message will pass through whole and undistorted. As Zagzebski and Locke both note, these risks arise at each link in the chain, and thus the longer the chain is, the less reliable it will be.

But real-life testimony, including in the context of religious traditions, is usually quite unlike *Telephone*, which after all is just a game designed to result in a silly outcome. Instead, in everyday life our practice of testimony borrows features from the following possible variations of the game:

Reliable Like *Telephone*, but everyone in the line has been selected because they are very good at whispering clearly and discerning what is whispered to them, and have no inclination to mess things up on purpose.

High-Stakes Like *Telephone*, but not just for fun: the message is seen as very important, and each person in line has an incentive not to get things wrong. This leads them to listen very carefully, whisper as clearly as they can, and never distort the message on purpose.

The elements of *Reliable* and *High-Stakes* that are missing from *Telephone* make it much less likely that any particular act of transmission will distort the original message, and so increase the reliability of the transmitted signal. And it seems clear that the transmissional practices of most religious traditions have features that mirror each of these: in general, the only individuals licensed to speak authoritatively about doctrinal matters are those with some kind of specialized training, and the matters under discussion are serious enough to the participants in the practice that there should be a strong incentive to transmit them accurately.⁷

But that is not all. Consider now the following further variations on the original:

⁶As Coady writes, the Lockean conception of hearsay "assimilates transmission to mere mimicry, like a series of parrots imitating each other" (*Testimony*, p. 221).

⁷Coady makes a similar point in *Testimony*, p. 216. Of course things may go the other way, too: recognizing the vital importance of a religious tradition might tempt those who guard it to distort its content in various ways, perhaps to serve their own ends.

Criss-Crossing Like *Telephone*, except that the chain of transmission isn't simply linear: instead of *A* relaying the message to *B*, *B* to *C*, and so on, there will be cases where a member of the chain whispers the message to more than one person, or receives the message from more than one source.⁸

Convergence Like *Telephone*, except that the initial message is whispered to several different people, each of whom begins a chain that converges on a single person at the end.⁹

Back-Tracking Like *Telephone*, except that sometimes the message passes back through someone earlier in the line, who has the opportunity to correct the message if it has been disorted.

Once again, the features of *Criss-Crossing*, *Convergence*, and *Back-Tracking* that make them different from *Telephone* also make the messages they transmit much less fragile. Specifically, in *Criss-Crossing* and *Convergence* there is the possibility of corroboration or non-corroboration¹⁰ that brings to light potential errors or enables participants to be more confident in the message they are passing along, and the additional mechanism in *Back-Tracking* constitutes a straightforward way to correct errors. And as before, the transmissional practices of religious traditions involve many of these elements, in contrast to the purely linear model suggested by *Telephone*.

Here is one further set of variations that do even more to increase reliability:

Double-Checking Like *Telephone*, except that each member of the chain is permitted to overhear what the next one says, and to correct her if the message has been transmitted wrongly.

Conferral Like *Criss-Crossing*, but when multiple people hear the same message they are permitted to discuss with one another what it is, and decide on a single message that will be relayed down the line.¹¹

Supervision Like *Telephone*, but now there is someone overseeing the entire process, ensuring that the message has been relayed accurately and correcting participants if it hasn't been.

Each of *Double-Checking*, *Conferral*, and *Supervision* adds another element that is missing from *Telephone* and the earlier variations on it, in that they are so structured that errors are corrected not only by chance, but deliberately and in a way that is built into the transmissional practice. And once again, many religious traditions have elements that mirror these: similar to *Double-Checking*, those who transmit religious doctrine are usually around to witness how their teachings are conveyed by others, and intervene if things go wrong; similar to

⁸For a similar suggestion, see Coady, *Testimony*, pp. 214-215.

⁹Compare Coady, *Testimony*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁰On the epistemic value of non-corroboration, see Coady, *Testimony*, pp. 213-214.

¹¹Thanks to Angela Schwenkler for suggesting this variation.

Conferral, it is possible for participants in a tradition to check with one another to ensure that the message is being received and transmitted accurately; and – more controversially, certainly, but centrally for someone like Aquinas – similar to *Supervision*, the entire process is often thought to be governed by some kind of divine oversight that helps to eliminate errors. (Of course that may be mythical, but insisting on that point would be question-begging in this context.)

Finally, note that all of these modified *Telephone* scenarios can be combined, I think indefinitely: thus we could imagine a situation in which there are multiple “first witnesses” who then create chains that diverge, backtrack, and converge; always double-checking, collaborating, and under the watch of a careful overseer; with participants who are highly reliable and motivated to get things right. The result of this will be a transmissional practice involving nothing more than chains of testimony and the oversight thereof, but whose outcome seems to be, as Aquinas suggests, at least as certain as most of the products of fallible human reason. If this isn’t “complete and accurate” knowledge, then very little of what we humans attain ever is.

Perhaps Zagzebski will reply that even if these cases show that reliance on the testimonial transmission of doctrine needn’t render a religious tradition too epistemically fragile for its later members to have any religious knowledge at all, still there is *some* degradation that necessarily occurs when information is passed from one person to another. (Even if we imagine a *Supervision*-style case where the overseer is omnipotent, omniscient, and dead-set on ensuring the fidelity of the message, there may still be questions about whom we are to trust, and to what degree.) I am not sure about this, though: for one thing, in *Double-Checking* and *Conferral* the ability to confer with one’s peers, plus the knowledge that one’s predecessors have done the same, might justify those of us later on in the chain in being every bit as certain than the original witness or witnesses, if not more so. But here is one more variation that still fits the model of Tradition as Transmission, yet where those later on in the chain seem to be in an epistemically *superior* position to those who begin it:

Summation Like *Convergence*, but each original witness is given only a proper part of the message, which is put back together when the chains of testimony converge.¹²

The inspiration for *Summation* is the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant: each one is touching some part of the beast and can report only what he feels; but we, who hear those reports, can combine them into an account of what they perceive that goes beyond each of their contributions. (I don’t mean to say that the world’s religions are like this.) Even if there has been some opportunity for each of their messages to be distorted before reaching us, still it could be that the sum of those messages tells us more about what they witnessed than any one of them heard in isolation.

I conclude that the model of Tradition as Transmission can account for the cross-generational stability of religious knowledge, contrary to Zagzebski’s

¹²For a similar case, see Coady’s discussion of the 1983 Australian bushfires, in *Testimony*, p. 214.

argument. But still it strikes me as insufficient, for reasons I expect Zagzebski will agree with. I turn to these in the final section.

4 Insularity

By my lights, the real problem with a pure model of Tradition as Transmission is not that testimonial transmission is too epistemically unreliable to extend religious knowledge to subsequent generations, but that the model is too *insular* in the way it envisions the development of a religious tradition and the role of faith in the life of religious believers.

The first way in which the pure model of Tradition as Transmission embodies an overly insular conception of faith is that it fails to recognize how knowledge from “outside” a tradition can interact with the knowledge that is transmitted by it. To see this, consider one more imaginary case, now different from *Telephone* in a more fundamental way than the earlier variations on it:

Background A person is in receipt of knowledgeable testimony that *p*. She also knows other things relevant to the subject, which helps to situate *p* in a broader context. Thanks to this background knowledge and her willingness to situate what she learns within it, she becomes even more knowledgeable about this matter than others before her who have testified to it.¹³

As with *Summation*, the case of *Background* is one where the epistemic situation of a person later on in a chain of testimony is epistemically superior to the positions of those nearer the source. In this case, however, this is not because she is in receipt of *more* testimony than her predecessors, but because she does not rest content with what she is told, instead combining it with other things she knows to yield a level of understanding superior to that conveyed by the tradition alone. All this is possible because in contrast to *Telephone* and its variants (including *High-Stakes*, where transmissional accuracy is the only goal), the person described in *Background* is concerned not just with discerning and conveying a given message, but also with getting at the *truth* of what the message is about. (As Coady puts it, in taking the word of a witness and passing it along to another person it is essential that you treat the message “as a worthwhile contribution to settling some issue.”¹⁴) And as Aquinas writes in discussing the value of philosophical argumentation in theological matters, if truth is our concern then it should not matter where it comes from:

... the gifts of grace are so added to nature that they do not destroy it, but rather perfect it; so too the light of faith, which is infused in us by grace, does not destroy the light of natural reason divinely

¹³Similarly, Coady (*Testimony*, p. 216) suggests the possibility of using archaeological evidence to demonstrate the reliability of an oral tradition. His point there is somewhat different than mine, however. He comes closer to describing a *Background*-style case with his discussion of Kit Carson and the Indians on p. 219.

¹⁴*Testimony*, p. 220.

placed within us. And although the natural light of the human mind is insufficient to manifest the things made manifest by faith, still it is impossible that those things which have been divinely taught us through faith should be contrary to what has been placed in us by nature. For one of them would have to be false, but since both come to us from God, God would have to be the author of falsity, which is impossible. (*On Boethius' De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3, c.)¹⁵

Aquinas' immediate concern in this passage is to defend the use of philosophical texts and arguments as means to defend the faith and correct those who deviate from it, but his own theological writings are clearly in the spirit of *Background* as well: he treats the "light of natural reason" as a source of knowledge of the material world and its creator, and draws constantly on philosophical and scientific concepts to extend his knowledge beyond what is simply conveyed to him by his tradition. In this way he accepts what has been transmitted to him by his forebears but also improves on that tradition from within, just as Augustine and other Christian thinkers had done before him.¹⁶

As I suggested above, part of what makes it possible for a healthy religious tradition to relate in this way to sources of knowledge that lie outside the tradition itself is the fact that its participants conceive of it not merely as a vehicle for transmitting a message, but also as a means of getting at some important *truths*. That these truths are seen as *important* truths helps such traditions to evade what I see as Zagzebski's more incisive criticism of the simple model of Tradition as Transmission:

This model cannot explain how a religious tradition is transmitted without some additional elements. Why would it matter to *us* what a man called Abraham did, or that Moses had a religious experience in front of a burning bush if we are only the distant recipients of testimony about their contact with God? If what tradition passes on is a reconstruction of someone's experience a long time ago, it is hard to see it as anything more than a historical curiosity, and their written texts as anything more than artifacts of an ancient culture. Chains of testimony do not add up to a tradition in a sense that pertains to religious belief unless the content of the testimony bears on the future recipients of the testimony. (p. 193)

Clearly, the point Zagzebski is making here applies even if a chain of testimony is so structured as to convey its message with perfect accuracy from one end to the other: in order to see this chain as part of a tradition in any meaningful sense, we need to know why the message is important to its members, and what real-life questions they take it to help them settle. This is, once again, something that is obviously missing from the set-up in *Telephone*, where the

¹⁵In Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, ed. R. McNerny (New York: Penguin, 1998).

¹⁶Compare Alasdair MacIntyre's description of Aquinas' project in relation to his Aristotelian and Augustinian roots, in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), chs. 5-6.

content of the message has no bearing on what people do outside the context of the game. And as I have emphasized, it is precisely because of the vital importance of what a religious tradition conveys that such traditions are able to embody transmissional practices that can convey information reliably in a way that the arrangement in *Telephone* does not.

The remarks I have just quoted also identify a further way that the model of Tradition as Transmission is overly insular, namely that religious faith – at least of the “living” variety, if indeed there is any other – is not *just* a matter of accepting the truth of certain doctrines, but also requires a more-or-less thorough integration of that attitude with the other aspects of one’s life.¹⁷ Because of this, religious traditions don’t convey bodies of doctrine alone, but also numerous things that are supposed to aid in the practice of faith, such as liturgy and other communal rituals, traditional practices of prayer and private meditation, various kinds of music and visual art, stories of individuals whose lives were somehow exemplary, ethical codes and catalogues of important virtues, and so on. Separated from these elements, religious faith runs the risk of degenerating into mere attachment to vague ideals or to the past for its own sake, with no sense of its living relevance. And as Zagzebski notes, all this means that the recognition of a religious tradition as authoritative is not just a matter of evaluating the truth of its doctrines, but also of seeing how engagement with the community in its practical directives will inform one’s life as a whole.¹⁸ At the same time, anyone who *does* take the teachings of their tradition as more than a “historical curiosity” is bound to regard them in the way Aquinas suggests, as truths that can stand in a mutually informing relationship with things that are known in other ways. And this would be unreasonable if what the tradition transmitted could not be counted as knowledge.

¹⁷ Thanks to Jon Butacci for encouraging me to develop this point. My talk of “acceptance” is deliberate: I have in mind a “purely intellectual” attitude taken toward a proposition, without any affective component or immediate dispositions to act on this basis. On the distinction between acceptance and belief, see L.J. Cohen, “Belief and Acceptance”, *Mind* 98: 367-389. On the centrality of affect to religious faith, see J.L. Kvanvig, “Affective Theism and People of Faith”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37: 109-128.

¹⁸ E.g. she writes: “... trust that a particular religious tradition puts one in the best position to get at the truth depends in part on trust that it contains the highest attainment of the human spirit in relation to God. But to think that, one must have nonepistemic trust in the tradition and would need to determine that the tradition has that quality by the fact that its teachings satisfy conscientious reflection upon one’s total set of psychic states, not just one’s set of beliefs” (*Epistemic Authority*, p. 200). And again: “The Church is more than a body with the authority to reveal truths of faith and morals. There are other natural desires ... which can be better satisfied by participation in a wisdom community than on one’s own. These desires include the desire to know and do the good, to acquire not just knowledge, but understanding, to learn patterns of living and principles of action that result in a more integrated self, to be surrounded by grace and beauty, and to experience the delights of living among persons whose own pursuit of those ends enhances one’s own. The authority of a community can be justified by a conscientious judgment that these desires will be more satisfied by participation in the community” (p. 201).